

## High-speed rail bill gets House approval (The News Journal)

Voting margin wide enough to override veto

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WASHINGTON --

Train travelers moved closer to a faster trip to New York or Washington with House passage of a bill supporting construction of a new high-speed rail system in the Northeast.

The

vote's 311-104 margin exceeds the two-thirds majority necessary to override President Bush's threatened veto. Rep. Mike Castle of Delaware was among 87 Republicans voting in favor of it.

The

bill would authorize \$14.4 billion for Amtrak and for states to develop intercity passenger rail systems in addition to high-speed rail systems over the next five years. It would set aside \$1.75 billion over the next five years for 11 high-speed rail corridors.

Private companies could bid on building the rail system.

"For

anyone who has driven on the I-95 corridor recently, it is strikingly clear that highway congestion has become a critical problem -- threatening business productivity, increasing safety risks, and hindering efforts to improve air quality," said Castle, who commutes daily on Amtrak along with Delaware's two senators.

Wilmington

already has express service via the Acela train, which takes passengers from Washington to New York in less than three hours. But this legislation calls for rail service that would cut the trip to less than two hours, traveling at speeds expected to reach at least 110 mph.

The

legislation would require the secretary of Transportation to request proposals for the financing, design, construction and operation of the

high-speed rail service. A commission of state, local, federal, rail and rail labor stakeholders will evaluate proposals and make recommendations to Congress, which will then take action to begin work on the corridor.

A provision from Castle would ensure stops at or near the Northeast corridor's busiest Amtrak stations, which include Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore. A bit further down on the list are Trenton and Newark, N.J.

The bill also calls for an improved financial accounting system and a five-year financial plan and would set aside \$400 million per year to be given directly to the states for new passenger rail projects.

While the bill's call for opening up train routes to private competition has drawn bipartisan support, some Democrats, including Sen. Frank Lautenberg of New Jersey, strongly opposed privatization.

Lautenberg co-wrote an \$11.4 billion Amtrak bill that passed the Senate 70-22 in October. Sen. Tom Carper, D-Del., a member of the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, said he would encourage the House and Senate to quickly resolve any differences between their two Amtrak bills and send the legislation to the president for his signature.

"This bill puts Amtrak on track to be more self-sufficient; makes for safer, faster travel; protects Amtrak jobs; and means federal operating subsidies will be redirected to innovative revitalization projects like those planned near the Wilmington train station," Carper said in a statement lauding the House bill's passage.

Though Bush likes the House bill's privatization proposal, White House officials threatened Monday to recommend a veto. Their statement said the bill would authorize funding "without requiring any meaningful reforms in Amtrak's governance or operations and without allocating resources based on the demand for passenger rail service."

Amtrak operates about 90 trains daily through Delaware, making Wilmington the

11th-busiest station in the national Amtrak system, according to Carper's office.